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Energy Stars to Fort schools

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Representing the cutting edge of energy-efficiency and renewable energy initiatives, two Fort Atkinson elementary schools were awarded the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Energy Star certification Wednesday.

Federal and state officials, including former Wisconsin Lt. Governor Barbara Lawton, were on hand to recognize Rockwell Elementary School and Fort Atkinson Middle School's performance in the top 25 percent of buildings nationwide for energy efficiency.

Also during the presentation, the school district celebrated completion of the high school wind turbine and accepted the energy incentive check from Focus on Energy and We Energies totaling \$269,164.

"We are, indeed, proud of the efforts we have made in Fort Atkinson in concert with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's efforts to make safe our environment for future generations, along with conserving energy and taking advantage of green energies that are renewable and environmentally friendly," said District Administrator Dr. James Fitzpatrick.

He recognized School District of Fort Atkinson director of buildings and grounds Dennis Kuchenmeister, as well as the administration, faculty, staff and students of the schools, in leading the charge.

Citing its various accomplishments toward becoming more energy efficient and environmentally aware, Lawton pointed to the School District of Fort Atkinson as an example of what can happen under visionary leadership, including the guidance of the school board and building and grounds director.

Lawton said the district's story is one she has shared around the country and beyond, adding that the label of the School District of Fort Atkinson being on the cutting edge is accurate.

Her intent in issuing the Energy Star school challenge was to unlock the potential Wisconsin schools have to lead. When she extended the challenge to Fitzpatrick, Lawton recalled, he told her about what already had occurred within the district and then proceeded to take her up on the challenge to reduce energy use by another 10 percent.

Having already lowered lighting use and installed solar panels to heat pools, she noted, the school district and Fitzpatrick were bold enough to take on the challenge for the additional energy reduction.

"Part of the reason he could say that and make that commitment is that he had director of building and grounds Dennis Kuchenmeister, who said 'OK, I can figure that out' and the district employees and students who were with them," Lawton said.

In August 2010, Lawton was on hand for the Energy Star award presentations for Purdy and Barrie elementary schools. At that point, she said, the School District of Fort Atkinson's overall energy usage had decreased by 29 percent with a cost savings of 20 percent from 2005.

"What an extraordinary success a real triumph in leadership for this state coming right here out of Fort Atkinson," she said.

The former lieutenant governor said she was pleased to be present again as two more Fort Atkinson schools reach the high bar set by the EPA to receive their Energy Star awards.

"I saw the wind turbine as I came in and I thought what a wonderful marker for a school district that wants people to know 'we can do better and the students are helping to lead the way,'" Lawton said.

The EPA's Energy Star energy performance scale helps organizations assess how efficiently their buildings use energy relative to similar buildings nationwide.

Energy Star was introduced by EPA in 1992 as a voluntary, market-based partnership to reduce greenhouse gas emissions through energy efficiency. Today, the Energy Star label can be found on more than 60 different kinds of products, appliances, new homes, and commercial and industrial buildings. Products and buildings that have earned the Energy Star prevent greenhouse gas emissions by meeting strict energy-efficiency specifications set by the government.



GOING GREEN — For continued efforts in energy-savings and renewable-energy initiatives, two schools in the School District of Fort Atkinson were honored with U.S. Environmental Service Energy Star certification on Wednesday. Former Wisconsin Lt. Gov. Barbara Lawton joined an EPA representative in presenting the awards to Rockwell Elementary School and Fort Atkinson Middle School. Pictured above, members of Rockwell Elementary School's Green Team accept their Energy Star plaque. From left, they are: Ashton Hansell, Rockwell principal Vicki Wright, Drew Hebbe, Olivia Kees, Mariah Bown, Hayden Zachgo, Alexis Dudzek and Jack Barnette of the EPA. Below, members of the Fort Atkinson Middle School Green Team accept their Energy Star award. From left, they are: science teacher Jenny Statz, Lacey Mehring, Cassie Hanson, Molly Bare, middle school principal Rob Abbott and Carolyn Bury of the EPA. — Daily Union photos by Ryan Whisner.



Quoting Sir Isaac Newton, Jack Barnette of the EPA said, "I see far because I stand on the shoulders of giants.

"I feel a little bit like this school district is a giant in this nation because it really is a national program that is really leadership in a big way," he said.

Barnette said the EPA looks for schools that achieve 25-percent energy efficiency above other buildings or other school districts. He said the School District of Fort Atkinson has achieved 39-percent energy efficiency.

"It means we're saving money and that's a good thing, too, because we want that money to go back into the schools and enhance the programs," he said.

Rockwell Elementary School principal Vicki Wright and Fort Atkinson Middle School principal Rob Abbott accepted the Energy Star award plaques on behalf of their schools from Barnette and Carolyn Bury of the EPA.

Wright said the Rockwell Student Council selected having a "green" focus as its project for the year.

"It all started with the audit of the building for this Energy Star award," she said.

Members of Rockwell's Green Team presented information on the projects completed in the 2009-10 school year.

"I think you'll be surprised what you can do with recycled paper, glue and old cereal boxes," Wright said. "They'll tell you how, through their audit, we were not only able to save energy, but how to do other things to help protect the environment."

Students Drew Hebbe and Ashton Hansell discussed how Rockwell Green Team members tested light fixtures to determine how much electricity was being given off. Audits also were completed on the heat, humidity and overall use of electronics in the school.

"All of this helped Rockwell become a more eco-friendly place," Hansell said.

Green Team members Alexis Dudzek and Hayden Zachgo explained how the Rockwell students painted small wooden apples which state "Please Turn Off the Lights" and placed them next to every light switch in the school.

"That way, the school can be greener by saving electricity and power," Zachgo said.

Olivia Kees recalled that in the 2009-10 school year, members of the Student Council picked up trash around the outside of the school.

"We found plastic bottles, wrappers and pop cans," she said.

Each team collected at least one bag of garbage.

"We all felt good about making the outside of our school look cleaner and plan to do the same this year. Never doubt the change kids can make," she said.

As mementos of the Rockwell Elementary Green Team, recycled paper notepads were presented to attendees. The notepads were made using cut pieces of scrap paper and cut-up cereal boxes.

Middle school principal Abbott said he was pleased that the school was recognized with the Energy Star award.

"If you have been at Fort Atkinson Middle School, you know it is an extremely complicated building that has had a number of additions over the years," he said. "It has been fun to be part of the process and see how such a complicated building can be part of these energy efficient initiatives."

Overall, the principal said, the challenge is to instill a sense of growth in the area of sustainability among students.

For the 2009-10 school year, the middle school's Green Team consisted of about 35 students in grades 6-8.

A past member of the Purdy Elementary Green Team, seventh-grader Molly Bare, said she has enjoyed participating in the effort at the middle school.

"In Green Team, we try to keep the students involved in environmentally-friendly activities and help them all to realize that the world is better green," she said.

For the 2011-12 school year, the main focus of the middle school Green Team is creation of the TerraCycle program.

Based in New Jersey, the company collects previously non-recyclable or hard-to-recycle waste and then upcycles it into everyday usable products. Items collected by TerraCycle include candy wrappers or chip bags and ink cartridges. The school will receive a small payment for each item submitted to promote the Green Team and other projects.

Green Team members from the two schools were encouraged to participate in the EPA's national blog Greenversations, as well.

Also as part of the presentation, Fitzpatrick read a state legislative citation plaque presented to Rockwell Elementary School and Fort Atkinson Middle School on behalf of state Rep. Andy Jorgensen, who was unable to attend in person.

For the secondary part of the ceremony held Wednesday morning, Fitzpatrick recalled the district holding public comment sessions on whether to install the wind turbine at the high school. He said those opposed to the turbine made comments about birds striking the turbine, noise, people getting headaches and other unfounded statements that were not research-based.

The superintendent noted that Kuchenmeister and others were on hand to address any of the questions people had.

"We feel pretty fortunate that we are one of the very few that took the chance and had the opportunity because of the great initiatives offered to actually install the wind turbine we have," Fitzpatrick said, noting that since the installation, he has seen a tremendous growth in wind energy uses throughout the state.

"When it comes to bold, Dennis is the guy who is bold; I'm just the guy who has a lot of confidence in his boldness," Fitzpatrick said.

Throughout the Fort Atkinson school district, Kuchenmeister has worked on many different energy-saving and energy-generating projects. The high school building, Fort Atkinson Middle School and Purdy Elementary School all sport a number of solar panels, with the high school and middle school using the power generated to heat their swimming pools. In addition, four buildings in the school district are heated and cooled via geothermal units.

The Fort Atkinson school district has been recognized in the past for its efforts in saving and generating renewable energy. The district has partnered with Focus on Energy and We Energies since 2002, and was recognized in August 2010 with two Energy Star awards for Purdy Elementary School and Barrie Elementary School.

The high school wind turbine system cost a total \$414,000, but incentives from We Energies and Focus on Energy brought that down to \$145,709. The payback period initially was expected to be 11.3 years, but it will be 13.6 years, assuming that current electrical rates remain the same.

The high school turbine's maintenance is covered by warranty for the first five years. In year six, maintenance is estimated to cost about \$2,000 annually. Kuchenmeister said that as of 7 a.m. Wednesday, the turbine had generated 42,787 kilowatt hours of electricity, which offsets a substantial amount of carbon monoxide emissions from motor vehicles and is enough to power a number of homes. He said use of the wind turbine produces approximately 5 percent of the annual high school energy consumption.

To date, the best months of turbine productivity have been May and September. Improvements are anticipated through the winter as adjustments are made to ensure less downtime.

Kuchenmeister recognized those who have contributed to the construction or implementation of the initiatives at the schools, including the School District of Fort Atkinson Board of Education, Fitzpatrick, Jonathan Evans of Sustainable Engineering Group LLC, Heather Feigum of Focus on Energy and Wayne Koessl of We Energies.

"We could not have gotten anything done without their support," he said.

Feigum and Koessl presented the district an oversized check facsimile for \$269,164, representing the incentive amount offered to assist in the installation of the wind turbine.

"We're proud to have this wind turbine up as a commitment of your sustainability," Feigum said.

Koessl agreed. "I want to commend the superintendent, Dennis and the school board for having the courage and innovation to go ahead with projects like this," he said.

"Dennis I don't know what's next, but I'm sure something is coming," Fitzpatrick said.

Future projects in the works include retrocommissioning of the high school and Luther Elementary School in hopes of earning Energy Star certifications for those two buildings.

Kuchenmeister slyly mentioned he would like to see additional solar panels at the high school.

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